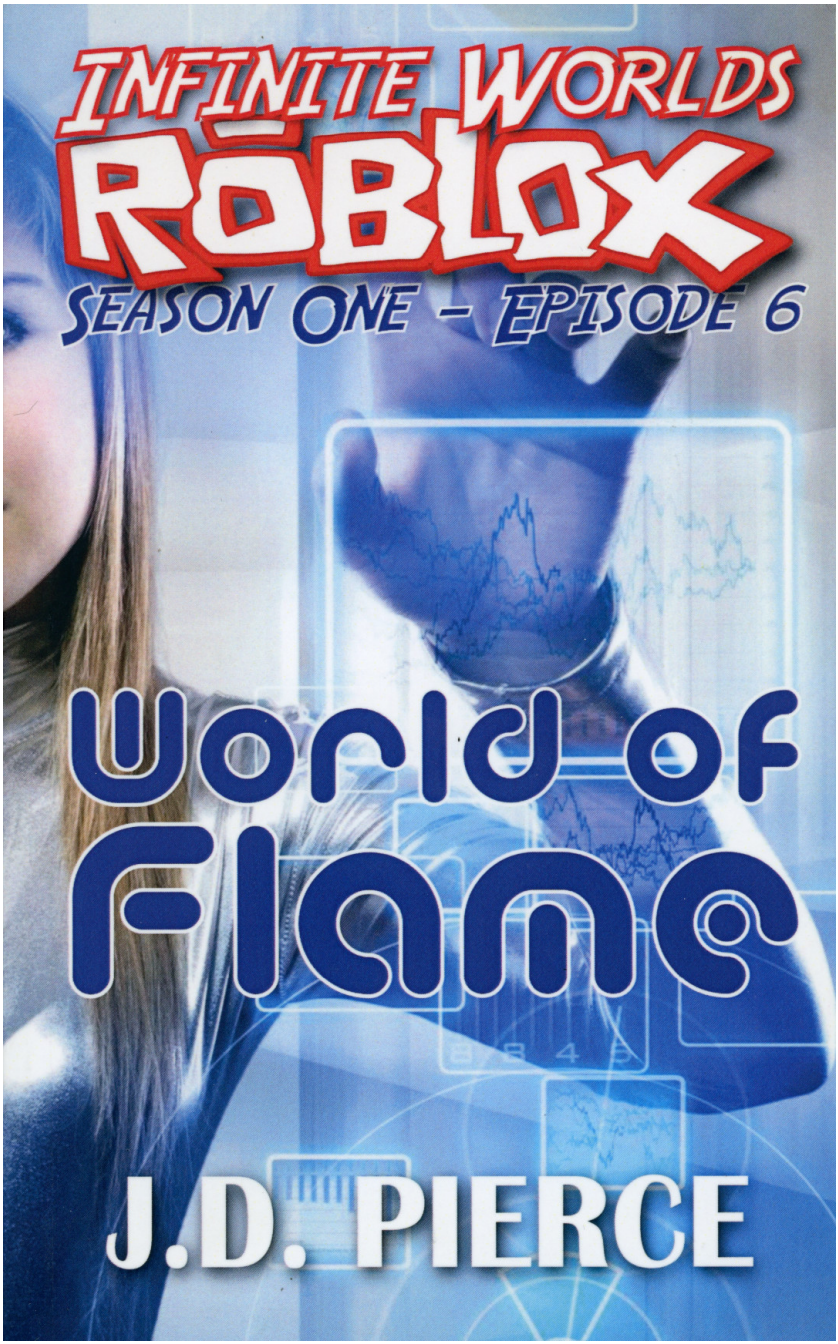
INFINITE WORLDS
ROBLOX
SEASON ONE - EPISODE 6
World of Flame
J.D. PIERCE

World of Flame

Infinite Worlds ROBLOX
Season One - Episode 6

by J.D. Pierce

Summary

The battle to save Earth begins online.

Season One - Episode 6

In the explosive conclusion to Infinite Worlds ROBLOX: Season One, Chester and 1X play a dangerous game of cat and mouse with each other and the United States military, But can Chester come out on top to save the world from someone bent on its destruction?

INFINITE WORLDS ROBLOX unfolds over six books of approximately 150 pages each (20,000 words) with the first five books ending in epic cliffhangers.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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Please support the author of the Infinite Worlds Roblox series, Steve DeWinter: https://bit.ly/SteveDeWinter-AZ

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Chapter 1

1X took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What he was about to do was unprecedented in all of human history. But if the world was to be spared from an alien invasion, he had no other choice.

He glanced at the clock on the wall behind him. If he planned to enter the viper's nest and collect the phone from Noah he had to leave soon. He knew entering the Maker Faire was a trap, but he had planned for every contingency. He would get in, collect the data from the phone, and get out before anyone even knew he was there. Timing was important to his plan, and he didn't have a moment to lose.

He was reaching for the power button on his computer when a window popped up on the display. He recognized its source instantly and sat back down to read the message. Despite the lack of punctuation and being filled with several typos, he was able to glean the message from his son after several readings.

"dad I know you and I have our difference but we must work tgether if we are to save the aliens there is no invasion fleet there was just one alien in the data stream it was thomas mother coming ot take him home major general braxton has taken both of them the file on noahs phone is trap it it embedded with a worm that will give your position away once you access it this was not my doing i have been cut off and cant access any of my systems you have to stop braxton and help the aliens leave the planet do this for me do this for us please"

1X pushed his keyboard aside and sat back in his chair. His eyebrows knitted together as he pushed his fingers up in a steeple in contemplation. For the first time in his life, he was conflicted.

He was so close to realizing the dream that began long before Chester was born. But he couldn't deny the emotions that stirred in him when his only son called out to him for help.

He glanced at the clock. If he didn't leave soon, he would miss his chance at obtaining the data from Noah's phone. Chester's warning

about the computer worm didn't bother him. He had expected there to be something. He actually would have been disappointed if there wasn't. Chester would never hand over such world altering software to the greatest hacker on the planet. Not even if that hacker was his father.

The second hand of the clock swept around its white face twice before 1X decided what was most important to him.

He slid the keyboard back in front of the monitor and accessed the private communications servers in the secret underground base where Chester worked. He wouldn't be the greatest hacker in the world if he couldn't gain access to it easily.

A list of message headers scrolled past his screen until he found the thread he wanted. He called up the messages and scanned them quickly, only seeing keywords that would tell him what the entire message meant.

The sudden back-and-forth between Braxton and someone named Emerson was filled with words he never wanted to hear in connection with his son.

Major General Jerry Braxton had been a thorn in 1X's side before. Their history wasn't something he could ignore. And now, he had made his intentions clear towards his son.

Chester was in danger.

1X couldn't go after the data from Noah's phone directly like he planned. All his life, 1X had been filling his bucket of favors from various organizations around the world, most of them questionable, but all of them loyal to those who helped them.

It was time for him to call in his favors. He needed to do so many things in so little time, he decided he might need to call in every one if he was going to guarantee success.

He typed quickly as he sent one message after another all over the globe. He was just sending the email to a contact near the end of his list when the replies started coming back. Despite their

different languages and syntax they all basically said the same thing; “Whatever you want us to do, we are here for you.”

1X smiled to himself as he typed one last message and hit send.

Chapter 2

Chester sat alone in the room. He was staring at the Frankenstein monster he had fashioned from the stolen radio and his shattered keyboard. He was just formulating the beginnings of an escape plan when a sudden angry sound made him jump and jerk away. He stared intently in the direction of the noise and realized with alarm it was coming from the Frankenstein Keyboard. He leaned in closer and listened to the short bursts of hissing it was making.

He shook his head and drew his eyebrows down in worry. It must be starting to fail. Maybe it was the squelch circuit in the two-way radio that was beginning to short out from the hastily constructed wiring that he cobbled together with chewed-up bubblegum. Perhaps, as the gum dried, the connections were starting to lose their conductivity and, if that was the case, the radio was going to stop working. He hoped his message would be received before that happened.

He reached for the radio to pull the battery out before the short started a fire when he paused, his hand hovering over it as the squelching tone repeated itself.

This wasn't random hissing. There was a pattern to the empty channel noise. This was a message.

He took his hand away quickly and listened intently. It didn't take long to recognize the gaps of silence between the constant hissing as a message sent using a variation of Morse code.

Chester grabbed a pen, closed his eyes, and began writing directly on the desk as the gaps of silence formed first into letters and then into words in his head.

When he was certain that the message was repeating again, he opened his eyes and looked at what he had written.

"I'm running late. Just sit tight. I'm sending Uncle Nick to pick you up."

Chester's mouth hung open at the name. He had met "Uncle Nick" only one time before. During one of the rare trips outside the government let him have, he happened to meet a maintenance man working beside an electric cart. He didn't remember why, but he really wanted to drive it. So, after a brief discussion he convinced the guy to let him try. He thought the guy only felt sorry for the poor boy who wasn't allowed to see the sun very often, and decided to be nice.

After next getting Emerson's begrudging approval, the maintenance man climbed in and slid over to the passenger side as Chester climbed into the driver's seat. Then, just as Chester grabbed the steering wheel, the maintenance man stomped on the gas pedal and they took off before Emerson could climb into the rear seat. Chester's wide eyes swung to the maintenance man who ignored his repeated pleas to ease up on the gas. Or electricity. Or whatever it was that made the cart go.

Once they were out of earshot from Emerson who gave up his pursuit on foot after a few minutes, the maintenance man reached over and grabbed the steering wheel, directing them behind Hanger One at Moffett Federal Airfield. This was before the exterior panels were removed; reducing the magnificent landmark that had stood proudly since the 1930s to a scant metallic skeleton. When it had skin, it was a big shield to hide behind.

He stopped the cart and turned toward Chester. Their conversation echoed in his head now as he remembered.

"My name is Nikolai Sidorov. I am an ex-Russian Spetsnaz soldier sent by your father to protect you." "Protect me from what?" Chester had asked.

Nikolai looked seriously at him. "Do not tell anyone about me. Ever. But if you see me again it will be because you are in immediate danger. I need to know that you will follow my orders without question on that day."

Chester was about to say something sarcastic when a jeep squealed around the corner and Emerson, with a small cadre of armed soldiers screeched to a halt next to them. The soldiers all

jumped out, pointing their guns at the maintenance man. He immediately held his hands up and looked at Chester, giving him a slight smile and an even slighter wink as he was led away.

Chester knew outside help might come in handy one day, so he played the naughty prankster and successfully convinced Emerson that he controlled the cart the entire time and thought up the idea to ditch everyone. They released the maintenance man with a warning and Emerson never again let Chester into the driver's seat before first climbing into the cart himself.

Chester hadn't seen Nikolai since that day and had practically forgotten all about him.

He read the message from his father once more before licking his thumb and rubbing at the ink on the table until it was an illegible blue smudge. After the message was adequately eradicated, he turned his attention to the radio. He couldn't use it any longer so it was time to dismantle it. He had to make sure Emerson never discovered that he had built it or they might stop his only chance of escaping.

He had just pulled the battery out when the door opened and Emerson stepped into the room.

Chapter 3

Emerson rushed at him and snatched the radio out of his hand. Emerson quickly studied the wires that led from the radio to the reconstructed keyboard on the desk.

He yanked the radio above his head, tearing the insecure connections and ending its capabilities in a single violent motion.

He then crushed the radio in his hand, pieces splintering and shooting in all directions as the plastic bent and broke in his iron grip.

Holding up the shattered remains in his hand he demanded, “What is this?!”

Chester stuck his chin out in defiance. “You didn’t expect me to just sit here and do nothing.”

“Who did you contact?!”

“Nobody. You busted in here just as I was putting in the battery. I don’t even know if it would have worked.” Chester made a show of looking at the wires strewn around the desk and the floor. Then shook his head slowly. “I guess now I’ll never know.”

Emerson tossed the remains of the radio on the floor at his feet and stomped on it for good measure. “Be thankful I caught you before you did anything stupid.”

Chester shrugged and tossed the battery on the desk. “Yeah, well, I had to try.”

Emerson grabbed Chester’s shoulder and pinched it between meaty fingers. The sharp pain sent sparks arcing through Chester’s vision. Chester cried out as Emerson forced him to walk towards the door. He hunched down trying to escape the vise that gripped his shoulder as he moved slowly forward.

“Move faster,” Emerson demanded.

From his low angle, all Chester could see were the feet that stepped into the doorway. The voice he recognized, despite only hearing it once before. “What’s the hurry?”

Unfortunately Emerson also recognized who had just blocked their exit. “What are you doing here?”

Emerson’s grip loosened slightly and Chester was able to look up into the serious face of the man standing between them and the hallway.

To his relief, it was “Uncle Nick.”

Nikolai slanted his head as he regarded the hulking form of Emerson. Nikolai wasn’t a considerably small man, but he was easily outclassed in both weight and visible muscle mass by Emerson. Chester started to worry, but despite the obvious disadvantages, Nikolai smiled easily. “I came to fix a problem.”

Emerson’s grip tightened again. “You can clean up this mess after we leave.”

Chester winced under the increasing pressure as he bent lower in his futile attempt to get away.

Nikolai looked from Chester to Emerson and back to Chester, addressing him directly. “You okay, son?”

Emerson pulled Chester back suddenly, stars exploding in his vision as the pain became unbearable. “I thought we already determined you do not have the clearance to talk to this boy.” Emerson’s grip lessened slightly, indicating his confusion. “Come to think of it. I had you removed from active duty here two years ago.”

And then his hand closed so tightly, Chester thought his shoulder was going to shatter under the pressure. “Ow,” Chester whimpered.

“Let the boy go!” Nikolai said. “You’re hurting him,” he added suddenly, but it was too late. Emerson tossed Chester into the room behind him. Chester lost his footing and stumbled back, landing hard on the floor with a pained yell.

“Why are you here?” Emerson said more slowly this time.

Nikolai remained silent but his eyes flickered briefly to Chester, betraying his true purpose.

“That’s what I thought,” Emerson said as he reached for his gun.

Chapter 4

Nikolai leapt forward instead of running away. This caught Emerson by surprise and he barely had time to remove the gun from its holster before Nikolai was on him. Nikolai remained focused on the gun as he wrapped both hands around Emerson's wrist and kept it from pointing at him.

Emerson took a step back to destabilize his attacker and let loose a flurry of punches with his free ham-sized fist, his punches pummeling into Nikolai's side like a jackhammer while they grappled for the gun in Emerson's other hand.

Emerson was known as "Thor's Hammer" in the informal, and highly illegal, boxing matches held in the secret underground facility. Despite his massive size, he was fast and ambidextrous. He could strike with lethal efficiency using either hand, which earned him the nickname. He had dispatched many an opponent using less force than he was using on Nikolai.

To his surprise, the attacker remained focused on keeping the gun pointed away from them and seemed to be ignoring the relentless blows landing on his ribs. Emerson swore he even heard a couple of them crack under the thunderous impacts.

A sudden sharp crack accompanied by unimaginable pain in his wrist holding the weapon sent the gun clattering to the ground, Emerson's vision tunneled briefly as he looked at his hand hanging limply at an awkward angle. He looked back at his attacker in time to see the tread of the man's boot as it slammed squarely into his face.

Emerson stumbled backward, shaking the impact off and swung with his only good hand at his attacker, aiming for the edge of his jaw. It was his signature fight-ending move. Nobody ever withstood "Thor" smashing a balled fist into the side of their face. As soon as his hammer impacted, right at the lower edge of the attacker's chin, it should have knocked him out cold. Instead, the man's head twisted violently to one side, but he remained standing and, quickly shook off the effects of the impact.

“Thor” was not as lucky. Emerson’s vision suddenly filled with stars as all the bones in his good hand shattered like fine china. The entire right side of his body was instantly on fire.

He bellowed in pain and his knees buckled under him. He pitched forward to land face-first on the floor with a groan, not even bothering to stop himself with useless hands. The sudden stillness in the room was unnerving.

He saw the man helping Chester to his feet. Emerson tried to push himself up from the floor, but that was a mistake. The pain shooting from his shattered wrist and hand sent the final shutdown order to his brain and the world went black.

Chapter 5

Chester let Nikolai help him. His back was sore from hitting the floor. As soon as Chester was on his feet, he crossed to his computer and snatched the dented metal tin from under his monitor and stuffed it into his pocket. It looked like they would be leaving for good and he didn't want to leave the only reason he was brought here behind.

Nikolai pressed a hand into his own side, feeling his ribs and silently counting as he worked his way up, grunted softly as he did.

"Are you okay?" Chester asked.

Nikolai winced a couple more times and smiled. "It's not the first time I've broken a few bones, kid. I'll heal."

"How do you know?"

He laughed, then grunted from the pain caused by that simple act. "I always do. I have to get you to the plane."

"What plane?"

Nikolai led him out of the room, peeking first into the hallway before motioning for Chester to follow him. "The SR-71. It's fueled and ready to go. I'm putting you on it."

Chester paused. "What about Thomas?"

"Who's Thomas?"

"He's one of the aliens."

Nikolai thought for a moment before letting out an audible sigh. "I am not here for them."

Chester flinched at the memory. "His mother's been shot. We have to save them."

Nikolai reached for him. "My orders are to get you to safety. If I

can help your friends, I will do that only after you are safe."

Chester pulled away. "You have to save them instead. They are more important than me."

"Not right now. You are my mission."

"What makes me so important?"

"Your father told me to get you out. A lot of important people owe their very lives to your father. When he asks for a favor, it gets done."

A phone rang, its muffled tone coming from somewhere among the folds of Emerson's uniform. Nikolai grabbed Chester and pulled him out of the room and down the hallway. He treated Chester with more respect and didn't hurt him like Emerson had done. Chester let himself be led to the next corner. "What about you?"

Nikolai paused and peered around the corner before looking back at Chester. "I owe more than my life to your dad. Wait here." He said before he darted around the corner and out of sight. There was a cry of surprise followed by a brief struggle and then silence.

Nikolai suddenly appeared and grasped Chester gently by the arm.

"Let's go," Nikolai said as he lifted Chester up. "Stay close to me and do exactly as I say."

As they rounded the corner, Chester gawked at two guards lying on the ground. Only one of them had a gun in his hand while the other's weapon was still firmly secured in its holster "Are they dead?"

Nikolai shook his head. "Your father requested a clean extraction. He doesn't want your freedom associated with bloodshed."

As they made their way past the two guards, Chester looked back at Nikolai. "Once they find Emerson, or these guys, they will come after us with everything they've got. How can you guarantee you won't kill anyone?"

“I didn’t guarantee anything. But I promised to try.”

Chester stopped and crossed his arms. “What about Thomas and his mother?”

Nikolai silently pleaded with Chester to follow him. “I won’t leave without them.”

Nikolai squeezed his eyes shut tightly for a moment, contemplating what to do before opening them again. “Fine.”

Chester nodded and Nikolai grabbed him and led him back the way they had come. They made it to the elevator that would take them up to the SETI building above. These were the actual offices that housed the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence and also proved a perfect cover for the base buried deep below it. People could come and go without arousing suspicion about the real activities taking place.

Nikolai pointed above them. “They are keeping the alien boy in the SETI offices. The girl was transported to a local hospital. We can’t help her.”

Nikolai pressed the button for the elevator and the light on the button blinked on. A half second later, the light went back out but the doors did not open.

Nikolai glanced around them and then pushed the button again. The light went on and then, just as quickly, went back out again.

Nikolai let out a noisy breath of air. “Uh-oh,” he said. “They know we’re here.”

Chapter 6

Twenty-five hundred miles away inside the mobile command unit stationed just outside the center of New York City, and well away from the conference center that housed the Maker Faire, Braxton listened as the answering message started again letting him know that Emerson was not available. It was the third time in as many minutes his call went unanswered.

Something was wrong. Emerson had never let his calls go unanswered. Not even when he was asleep. He always answered by the second ring. Now he had missed three consecutive calls. Something was definitely wrong.

Braxton disconnected the call and dialed a new number that was answered immediately; as it should be.

“Yes, Sir, Major General!” the voice crisply responded, caller ID identified it was Braxton before the man on the other end even answered. Braxton thought he heard the man snap to attention as he spoke.

“Is everyone in position?” Braxton asked.

He could hear papers rustling before the response came. “Yes, sir. We have the place secure.”

“Good. I do not want this 1X character to get away. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!”

Braxton disconnected abruptly and set the phone down on the receiver. He stared at a readout on his screen that showed an artist’s representation of what 1X might look like based on those who claimed to have seen him. He leaned forward and practically touched the screen with his nose as he stared at the carefully drawn picture.

“Today, your number is up.”

Chapter 7

At that same time in the center of New York City, 1X tugged his cloak tightly around his body to fend off the chill and crossed the street toward the convention center. A massive twenty-foot long vinyl banner stretched across the entrance doors announcing the Maker Faire.

As he walked, his prototype glasses scanned the crowd around him and overlaid data streams on every face, highlighting the ones in red that worked for military or civilian law enforcement agencies.

Half of the people in the crowd milling around the entrance were employed by the FBI, the CIA, and various military branches. Even if he hadn't had the assistance of the glasses' facial recognition software, the unnatural bulk of the coats were a dead giveaway. Nearly everyone around him wore bullet proof vests.

He watched the augmented reality displayed against the inside of his glasses as people gave his face, and then the conference badge that hung around his neck, a cursory look before moving on looking for someone more important.

He decided not to go with the name Juan Ecks on the badge. Why make it easier on his adversaries? This mission was too important and he was determined not to get caught before it was time.

Instead, he went with a French name he had generated randomly using an app on his phone. His badge proudly presented him as Gage Durand. Since it didn't match any alias he had ever used before, there would be no red flags should they run the name through the military and government databases.

1X chuckled to himself. If they happened to check all the registered names for the conference, one would produce a definite red flag. He had bought a second ticket under the name Juan Ecks. But, that sat patiently at the registration desk waiting for its owner to retrieve it. Something that wasn't going to happen today but hopefully would provide a sufficient distraction while he

accomplished his necessary task.

As the doors finally opened to signal the start of the Maker Faire, he stepped through into the atrium of the convention center and joined the crowds that surged into the exhibition. He glanced at the time displayed in a corner of his glasses. Any minute now, his program would run on its pre-scheduled time and bring everyone from the ROBLOX world to Maker Faire.

If he didn't have something important to do as soon as he had the data from Noah's phone, he would have loved to stick around to see the

mayhem that would be triggered by his program.

Despite seeing the time displayed as a hovering hologram into the space in front of him, he glanced at his watch. It displayed the timer for when the program was set to run, and it was ticking down the last few seconds. He hoped that the kids were ready for what was about to happen.

Chapter 8

Max and Terri stood in the middle of the street with the soldiers all around them. They watched the large timer floating in the sky that matched the timer on 1X's watch. As it counted out the final seconds, Max's hand instinctively sought out Terri's. She was warm and soft to his touch and she intertwined her fingers in his as soon as they touched.

They looked at each other as the timer counted down. The fear in his own eyes was reflected on her face. "It'll be okay," she said.

"Do you think this will even work," he asked.

She shrugged. "Ecks said that Chester created the program to transfer the human brain into a computer chip, so it should work."

"And we will be uploaded into robot bodies?"

Her eyes shone with a radiance he had never seen before. "It's only for a little while. Once we save Thomas and Chester, we will be home. In our real bodies."

He looked at the timer as it finally hit zero.

"Do you think it will hurt?" he asked.

She didn't answer, but he felt her hand tighten on his.

And then the world shattered.

Max couldn't feel Terri's hand anymore as his vision blurred and he lost all sense of his own body. His head swam and he thought he was going to be sick when he realized he didn't actually have a stomach to empty. He closed his eyes anyway to stop from seeing the entire universe swirling around him.

Everything around him shifted strangely. He suddenly felt his body become rigidly constricted and he felt an odd sensation emanate from the tips of his fingers and toes and radiate throughout his whole body. When the spinning ceased, he had this

wave of calm overcome him and everything seemed to be okay. It was quiet and peaceful. Maybe it was safe for him to open his eyes.

He slowly opened them and his heart leapt in excitement. He was standing in the middle of a street, cars littered the road around him. But he wasn't seeing everything from street-level. He was high up in the air. How could that be?

He twisted and saw his reflection in the windows of the closest building. He laughed out loud. He was inside a giant robot. No. Not inside. He was the giant robot! His massive mechanical form stood nearly two stories tall. The cars around him on the road were parked haphazardly, as if abandoned in a panic.

Max thought about his arms and large caliber spherical projectiles fired repeatedly from them, tearing massive chunks out of the corner of a building across the street. He became aware of something on his shoulder, and when he thought about it, a rocket launched out from a shoulder missile pod and exploded on the ground, sending one of the cars flying in pieces.

He was a giant killing machine. He was able and ready to do whatever he needed to do to save Thomas and Chester. Nobody could stop him; even if they wanted to. He arched his back, spread his arms wide, and let out a booming evil laugh.

Chapter 9

Outside the six-foot by six-foot Plexiglass arena that served to protect the players from the metal BBs and tiny rockets used during the RoboGames Hardcore class of Mech Warfare, one of the competition robots was tilting back and emitting a shrill, jarring, sound.

The robot stood nearly eight inches tall and was surrounded by toy cars and foam buildings to provide a simulated urban fighting environment. It had just unexpectedly started firing its BBs into the side of one of the buildings and then suddenly blew up a model plastic car with the micro rockets.

That's when it seemed to go haywire, tilting slightly back and emitting a sound it wasn't designed to make.

The owner of the robot, a twenty-year old MIT college student, stared in disbelief at his tiny remote controlled robot as he frantically pressed several buttons on his controller.

His friend nudged him. "Hey. How did you get it to laugh like that? That's cool."

The college student shook his controller in agitation. "I'm not doing anything! It's not responding."

His friend frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Before the college student could respond, commotion from the aerial combat arena drew their attention. A quadcopter drone shot over the exhibit floor, a man in his mid-fifties chased after it, his longish grey hair in a ponytail trailing behind him as he ran. He held his remote control awkwardly out in front of him and remained fixed on regaining control of his quadcopter. He didn't even apologize as he knocked into people milling around the booths. He just kept trying to get close enough to regain control.

A loud crash drew everyone's attention. Only the older man intent on running after his drone didn't seem to react. One of the

larger man-sized robots tore through the metal and fabric of a nearby booth and stumbled out into the crowded hallway. There was immediate pandemonium as everyone started screaming and running in every direction for cover. The robot continued to stumble while it struggled to recover its balance and smashed into another booth, starting a ripple effect as the booths along that side of the hallway began to topple like dominoes.

The larger robot staggered from the wreckage of the first booth and looked up at the drone that hovered over it. It twisted and came straight for the college student and his friend. They dove out of the way just before the robot grabbed the top of one panel of Plexiglass and tore it away, exposing the urban combat arena. The MIT student's robot picked its way through the shattered Plexiglass wall and joined the robots that had formed a small militia. There were about a dozen walking, rolling, or flying automatons moving through the exhibit hall under their own power.

The college student pressed every button on his remote, but it was no use. Other human robotics teams gathered around and joined him as they all struggled to regain control over their robots with useless remote interfaces.

Finally they all looked at each other realizing the futility of their efforts with the remotes, but none of them marshaled the courage to go and physically retrieve their respective robots.

The group of petrified robotics students just stood there in shock and cringed at the panicked screams as more and more people realized that the robot uprising everyone wasn't really worried about, if you had to be honest, had finally begun.

Chapter 10

Max realized sadly that he wasn't in a hundred ton mechanical beast when Terri contacted him through his own thoughts. He finally grasped that she was communicating using the wireless systems. He looked up to see her hovering above him in a quadcopter body.

He was so mesmerized by her fast spinning blades, he barely heard her warn him to get down as the clear walls shattered inward; followed by a massive metal claw that narrowly missed him. The claw retreated and Terri tilted away. "Come on," she said.

Max scrambled out of the arena with its model cars and buildings and into the hallway where the soldiers from ROBLOX were converging, each with their own robot body.

They were a funny ragtag group as they made their way through hordes of screaming humans. Max chuckled to himself. How easy it was to think of everyone around him as humans and he their robot master. If only he had been uploaded into a bigger body.

He hadn't been paying attention to where he was going and suddenly realized that he was walking alone. Where had all the other robots gone?

"Hey!" someone hollered.

Max spun around to see someone walking quickly toward him and looking around. "Whose bot is this?"

The man reached down to pick Max up. Max immediately thought about defending himself and BBs clattered from his arm cannon.

"Ow, ow, ow, ow, OW!" the man yelped and jerked his hand back, inspecting the tiny welts forming on his skin. He looked around him. "Very funny. Whoever you are, you are disqualified."

He reached again and Max let loose a rocket.

The man ducked, but not fast enough, and the rocket wedged itself into the tight curls of his short hair. The man responded by jumping repeatedly and smacking at his hair as it nearly caught on fire. Max decided it was best to get away before the man recovered.

Max started to turn when the man yelled out, “Oh no you don’t!” and started running at him.

Max tried to run faster, but his tiny legs couldn’t outrun a toddler, let alone a grown man.

Max spun around to try to defend himself, but right before the man reached him, a large metal claw appeared from the side of his view and snatched the man by the neck. The massive robot attached to the arm lifted the man off his feet. The robot brought his other arm up and waggled a finger at the man, warning him to leave Max alone. Only then did the robot set him back down; gently. Max noticed the man’s pants darkened in the front as liquid dripped down his pant leg. He backed away slowly, never taking his eyes off the large robot. Then he turned around the nearest corner and was gone.

The large robot faced Max and Ajax’s voice came to him through the wireless. “You okay, Max?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“No problem little buddy.”

Max followed Ajax back to the group who had hidden in a large booth, trying to stay out of sight as well as they could. That was easier said than done as the few people left in the area tried to emerge from their hiding places to escape. As they spotted the human sized hulking robot trying to hide in the booth with smaller flying, driving, and walking robots they either ducked back for cover or ran as fast as they could toward the exit.

As soon as Max joined them, Ajax addressed the group. “Okay. Ecks said that there is someone at the ROBLOX booth with something he needs. Our job is to provide a distraction…”

“Mission accomplished,” someone interjected.

Ajax ignored the interruption and continued. “We are to provide a distraction and cover for his escape. No matter what happens here today, Ecks must not be captured by the enemy forces that are all around us. Any questions?”

Max raised his arm, like he was in school. Ajax noticed and pointed a massive claw at him. “Yes, Max.”

“How am I supposed to help? I’m too small! I almost got defeated by some guy who was simply going to pick me up.”

Ajax looked around at the numerous robots of various shapes and sizes before returning his gaze to Max. “We all have challenges to overcome, Max. Don’t look at your weaknesses. Focus on your strengths.”

Before Max could ask what he meant by that, Ajax spread his huge arms, knocking one side of the booth over. “Now, let’s spread out. Keep your eye on the timer. We have to work together to create maximum chaos at the appointed time if we are to succeed in our mission. No matter what happens, the mission comes first. Hoo-rah!”

The rest of the soldiers in robot form all responded even louder. “Hoo-rah!”

Before Max knew what was happening, the robots separated and all went in different directions through the exposition hall.

Chapter 11

1X was on the far side of the hall when the robots all came alive at the other end and started rampaging through their small section before scurrying away from their owners.

News traveled fast. By the time people on this side of the expo hall were talking about it, it had morphed into a legend of such epic proportions that nobody believed it.

There was no way R/C robots could suddenly spawn awareness. Somebody obviously had read way too many science fiction novels.

1X glanced at the corner of his glasses to check the time. He had less than five minutes to be in position before the legends of living robots became a reality for the entire building.

1X made his way through the crowd, stopping occasionally to look at a booth so as not to arouse suspicion among those marked in red on his display.

Chapter 12

Braxton studied the monitors that lined one wall of his mobile command unit. The screens were direct feeds from every security camera in the expo hall where the Maker Faire was taking place.

He was looking for 1X. So was the facial recognition software that was running all the data points on each face in sight of the cameras against the hand-drawn picture they had. Facial recognition had improved drastically in the last few years, but it was still only as good as the input given to it. Without a real picture, the best they could hope for was time to review the growing list of possible matches the computer kept flagging.

He was rotating from screen to screen when he noticed an unexpectedly large number of people running in one direction. Something must be wrong. People rarely launched into an impromptu stampede inside a convention hall unless there was a good reason.

As he watched, he lifted his radio to call to his men, when he zeroed in on what the people were running from.

He nearly dropped the radio as he witnessed the life sized robot, trailed by a smaller one, stomp into view, turn, bend, and lift the smaller robot into the air. As he watched, the larger robot rotated to face the security camera and aimed the smaller robot at it. The smaller robot fired and the glass on the camera lens shattered under the barrage of tiny projectiles until the view was completely obscured.

Before the lens was completely cracked, Braxton caught sight of a company logo on the booth and his blood curdled. Noah was going to be at that ROBLOX booth when 1X made contact. Braxton was blinded by a tiny robot just outside that booth. This had 1X's fingerprints all over it.

He raised the radio to his lips and pressed the talk button, mashing the button into the plastic case. "This is Braxton. All units move in! 1X is on site!"

Braxton jumped up, yelling for the helicopter to collect him. He was going to be there when they captured 1X. This was his day and he wasn't going to be miles away when the most notorious hacker was taken into custody.

Braxton grinned like a fool as he waited in the rotor wash as the helicopter landed near the mobile command truck. He was sure this was going to make him a full General within the month.

Chapter 13

At the appointed time 1X was near the ROBLOX booth. He watched as Noah was caught up in the swarm of people running everywhere in the utter chaos.

As the only one who knew what was really going on, 1X was a beacon of calm in the swirl of terror. He positioned himself to quickly pick Noah's pocket. 1X's claim to fame was creating situations that erupted in this type of chaos. But this was the first time he was present to witness firsthand the results of his actions. He had always been separated by hundreds, if not thousands, of miles of digital cables when he unleashed disorder on the unsuspecting. This firsthand experience was exhilarating from the sheer energy displayed by the panicked masses.

As Noah was swept past the booth, 1X reached out a hand and withdrew his prize without even triggering a backwards glance from anyone.

Now that he had the phone with Braxton's computer worm on the SD memory card, he had what he came for. He thought about letting them capture him, but it wasn't the right time. He knew they would only free his son with the proper motivation, and he wasn't it.

He cracked open the back of the phone and removed the SD card. Pocketing the card, he dropped the phone on the floor letting the panicked throngs kick it around under their thundering feet.

1X looked once more at the panic ebbing around him and smiled. Then he started screaming and joined the crowds as they surged for the exits that had opened all along the exterior walls and spilled out into the streets of New York City.

Chapter 14

From his vantage point high in the sky, Braxton looked down at the multitude of panicked civilians spreading away from the convention center like spilled coffee beans skittering across the floor.

Frenzied reports flooded in on his radio forcing him to turn it off. Nobody on the ground knew what was happening and those who claimed they did weren't making any sense.

He couldn't stay up here. He had to get on the ground and find 1X before he escaped among the madness.

He tapped the pilot on the shoulder and pointed down. People ran away from the helicopter as it landed in the parking lot, the pilot ignoring their panicked screams.

Braxton hopped from the chopper and removed his pistol from its holster. As soon as he was clear of the spinning blades the helicopter lifted and arced away over the roof of the conference center.

He looked back toward the conference center and scanned the faces of the crowd spilling out. His eyes grew wide and he tightened his grip on his pistol as he recognized Noah among a group just coming out.

He ran over to him, making sure the pistol was pointed down but visible, and stared down at Noah. "Do you remember me?"

Noah nodded.

"Where's your phone?"

A confused look crossed Noah's face as he replied, "I have it right here."

Noah reached a hand into his pocket. When it came back out empty, he checked the rest of his pockets. "It's gone!" he exclaimed.

Braxton cursed under his breath and looked at the adult who still had a hand on Noah's shoulder. "Get him out of here!"

Not waiting for a response, Braxton turned toward the open doors of the conference center and lifted his own cell phone with his other hand, checking the readout on his screen. Just in case 1X succeeded in obtaining Noah's phone and evading his men, Braxton linked this phone with Noah's so he could track it.

He forced his way past people streaming out of the grand hall. Holding his gun in plain view did more to clear the way for him than yelling did. People's eyes were immediately drawn to its lethality and they gave him plenty of space. His uniform completed the picture which kept anyone from calling for the police.

By the time he made it inside, nearly everyone had fled. Everyone except his men who were running from one exit to another and scanning the last of the stragglers.

A soldier had removed his jacket, exposing his bullet proof vest and military credentials. He spotted Braxton and ran over, saluting as he stopped. "No sign of him, sir."

Braxton half-saluted back. Now was not the time for formality. They had to find and capture 1X. "I want all the…"

Gunfire erupted to one side and Braxton and the soldier ducked. A large robot crashed backward through a booth amid a shower of sparks, tearing the black fabric as it fell to the floor. Two more soldiers immediately joined in the barrage and fired into it, both emptying their magazines.

As soon as they clicked empty, they changed magazines, slapping fresh ones into their assault rifles and prepared to empty those into the robot if it moved again.

Seeing Braxton, they nodded to acknowledge him before a noise drew their full attention in another direction. More gunfire resulted in an explosion among the ventilation shafts that crisscrossed along the exposed ceiling. A quadcopter drone fell while on fire into a booth, spreading the flames to the material. Two more soldiers

rushed in and extinguished the fire before it spread to the booths on either side.

There were more sporadic gunshots until all the robots that had spontaneously come alive were properly dispatched.

Braxton hadn't needed to finish his sentence earlier as his soldiers had anticipated his needs and had eliminated the only remaining threat in the building. Now that all the robots were immobilized, Braxton lifted his phone and got his bearings. He followed the tracking signal from Noah's phone right to where it rested in the corner of a smashed booth.

Braxton lifted the phone and inspected the back. The cover had already been removed and the SD card was missing. He slammed it on the ground, shattering it into several pieces that skittered across the polished concrete floor.

He looked around the deserted exhibition hall. The only people visible were his soldiers. A few fires still smoldered among the wreckage of booths toppled by rampaging robots or by the masses in their hectic escape from the building

One thing was certain.

1X was gone.

Chapter 15

Max last remembered running, shooting out cameras, and trying to pull apart booths when soldiers appeared with assault rifles. Several shots later, he was back on the street in ROBLOX. One by one, the soldiers re-appeared at the spawn point. As they were destroyed in the real world they returned to Max's ROBLOX world. He waited until he saw Terri appear and rushed up to catch her before she crumpled to the ground.

She looked up at him as he held her in his arms. "Do you think we did it?"

Max smiled sadly. "I hope so."

Ajax walked up to them and placed a hand on Max's shoulder. "It was a pleasure to serve with you. You fought admirably and if we didn't complete the mission, it was not because we failed."

Max looked up at him. "What happens next?"

Ajax shrugged. "We wait."

"Wait for what?" Terri said softly.

Ajax looked at the soldiers gathered in the middle of the street. "We wait for Chester to bring us home."

Terri was finally able to stand on her own feet, but kept her hand firmly connected to Max's. She looked at him, all the fun and energy sapped from her. "How long do you think it will take for Chester to free us?"

Max wasn't sure. "That depends on whether Ecks' plan worked."

Chapter 16

Nikolai glanced around the hallway in time to see two soldiers converging on their position, pointing assault rifles directly at them. There was nothing he could do. Nikolai knew he was fast, but not faster than a bullet. An assault rifle could sling dozens of bullets at him in a split second.

He stood rigid and raised his hands.

Emerson limped around the corner, looking like he had been hit by a speeding train after crashing a plane on railroad tracks. Both his arms were wrapped in bandages and hung in slings around his neck. His face was mottled with dark purple spots and a shiny sliver of drool ran out of one side of his swollen lips. He hobbled up to Nikolai and glared at him. He spoke in a low guttural sound as if he were growling. “You and I have unfinished business.”

Nikolai nodded slightly. “Anytime. Anywhere.”

This seemed to enrage Emerson who spun around and limped away, doing his best to not show how much pain he was in. “Take them!” he snarled as he disappeared around the corner. The soldiers moved in to do his bidding. They grabbed Nikolai’s arms in vice grips that definitely bruised, then twisted and pulled, almost snapping tendons as they strapped zip ties to Nikolai’s wrists. He noticed that they were treating Chester just as roughly.

1X was right. This was proof they would not let Chester live once his usefulness ended. It looked like that time was here. Nikolai squinted his eyes as he focused on the two soldiers who were crushing Chester’s arms as they readied to secure Chester’s hands with more zip ties.

Nikolai moved so swiftly the first soldier had no idea what was happening before his head slammed into the wall. As the first soldier slid down to the floor unconscious, Nikolai moved on the second one before he could react. Having his hands secured behind his back was no hindrance. His Spetsnaz training prepared him for exactly this situation.

He jumped into the air and wrapped his legs around the neck of the second soldier and twisted his body. The soldier's head bent at an awkward angle and he went down to the ground. His face smashed against the floor, rendering him out of commission.

Chester just stood and stared at the two immobilized soldiers. He looked up in alarm at Nikolai. Nikolai responded by turning around before muttering over his shoulder, "Take that soldier's knife and cut my bindings."

Chester did as he was told. Then Nikolai took him gently by the hand and pulled him along until they were running down the hall away from the place that had almost ended the mission.

"Where… are… we… going?" Chester asked, already out of breath.

Nikolai knew there was only person who could help them get where they wanted to go without being stopped. He rounded the corner and took Emerson from behind, wrapping his arms around the weakened man's neck and under one arm. He lifted slightly and torqued Emerson's body enough to silently demand immediate compliance. Emerson grunted, but was unable to resist or fight back.

Nikolai leaned into Emerson's ear as he applied pressure to his neck. "I'm ready to settle that score if you are."

Chapter 17

1X ordered the cab driver to stop right before he continued across the Brooklyn Bridge. He paid in cash, adding a generous tip, and left the cab to continue walking on the street. Heading down several back alleys, he ensured he was not being followed before he approached the bridge foundation on the Manhattan side. First checking one last time that he was alone, he slipped through a doorway that was recessed into the brick wall, completely invisible from only a few feet away.

In a city with over 170,000 people per square mile it was quite the challenge to find a place where he could work undisturbed. His sanctuary had nearly been discovered when city workers stumbled upon the Cold War era bomb shelter adjacent to his hideaway. But his diligent work to seal in his space kept it from being discovered. He always delighted that his hideaway was right alongside one of New York's best kept secrets. The city wanting to keep the exact location of the Cold War bunker undisclosed was an added bonus. He didn't have to worry about tourists constantly walking within feet of his private lair.

Stepping around boxes of blankets labeled "For Use Only After Enemy Attack." he made his way to the hidden door and opened it. He looked back along his new wall that blended in with the masonry work he had painstakingly fashioned to look like the original wall that stood a dozen feet further into the shelter.

He pressed on a brick and the wall slid inward, giving him just enough room to wriggle into his secret shelter. He shut the door behind him and waited until the seal was secure before turning on the lights.

The overhead lamps flickered to life as he crossed over to his state-of-the-art computer system. He sat down and pulled the SD card from his pocket. Inspecting it, he realized that it held the key to getting everything he was working towards. But using that key was not without risk.

He turned on his computer and set the SD card on the table in

front of him. He had to time its use perfectly if he was going to save his son. But before that could happen, a lot of pieces had to fall into place with the precision of a Swiss-made clock.

It was time to call in the last of his favors. He accessed a secured server that lived on the dark internet. Very few people knew about the network of servers inaccessible on the normal Internet; these hidden servers lived on their own network and never linked with what grew from the military run ARPANET in the late 1960s.

The oldest of his computers was hardwired into this dark Internet. Another discovered benefit from using this location was that it already had the necessary wiring. It must have been originally rigged by one of the first hackers because the dark Internet wires ran alongside the regular wires. It was almost too much of a coincidence, but after a few years of never being discovered. 1X took it as a green light to go ahead with his plans.

This particular computer was not connected to any of the other computers in his bunker. If it had been it would have been immediately banned from the dark Internet service at the MAC address level. The dark Internet was so closely guarded, it was regularly scanning for unauthorized computers by their unique identifier burned into the network interface hardware by the manufacturer. If he connected his special system to the public Internet it would be immediately discovered, the system would be promptly removed, and his hacker cred would be dragged through the virtual mud for introducing vulnerability into the vigilantly protected private worldwide hacker's network. He would then be shut out of the network forever. He couldn't let that happen.

1X was one of the few international hackers who kept to himself. He was not one to brag about his activities both on and offline. He had decided long ago that arrogance only led to discovery. He was mostly a lurker on the dark Internet, only occasionally poking his head up to help select hackers when he determined it would be worthwhile to acquire favors from them for use at some point in the future.

He had called in every favor but one. For that, he had to go where few were willing to tread. He accessed the dark Internet from

the old computer that displayed only vivid green text on the phosphor-coated glass of the cathode ray tube.

He called up an archaic email program and typed in the email address from memory. If he had needed to write this email address down to remember it, he wouldn't have been worthy of knowing it in the first place.

He typed in a short message and hit send. The message didn't need to be long. He shut off his computer without waiting for a response. He knew none would ever come. There was a hundred percent surety that if 1X ever had to make contact with this hacker again, his final mission would have ended in failure. No, not just failure for the mission. He would have failed.

Failed himself.

Failed his son.

Failed the world.

He stood and picked up the carbon steel crowbar that was leaning against the side of the desk. He swung it wide, impacting the gooseneck hooked end directly into the monitor of the old computer. The glass shattered and the internals were immediately destroyed, including the hard drive and the other components built directly under the tube. His last message was to remain the last one he ever sent into the dark Internet. Besides, he couldn't leave an open portal to the dark Internet lying around unattended.

After today he would have no more chits to call in from anyone. But it didn't matter. After today, he would no longer be a free man.

Chapter 18

Under the SETI Institute in Mountain View, California, Chester watched as “Uncle Nick” bent Emerson to his will. He trailed behind them as they made their way back to the elevator. With Emerson held tightly in his grip, Nikolai forced him to call the elevator using his verbal passkey. With such high authorization, the elevator finally responded properly and this time the light stayed lit until the doors opened.

Nikolai duck-walked Emerson ahead of him into the elevator. He spun around and motioned for Chester to join him with a nod of his head. Once inside, Nikolai motioned with his head to the numbered buttons and twisted Emerson to face them. “Which floor are the aliens on?”

Emerson grunted from the pain as he spoke. “There is only one here. The other was transported to the hospital.”

“Which floor?” he said again and torqued Emerson’s back to elicit a speedy response. “Second Floor,” Emerson growled through gritted teeth.

Chester pressed the button and the doors hissed shut. The elevator jolted and rose quickly. Despite traveling to the second floor, they still had several underground levels to pass before they reached the tree-lined building visible from the street.

As the elevator shot up, Nikolai fed his free hand behind and through Emerson’s bandage-wrapped arm and gripped his own wrist that currently held Emerson’s neck in a vise grip. “Your time’s up,” Nikolai said and then squeezed.

Emerson’s eyes popped out as he struggled against the strangling grip on his neck. Nikolai ignored the sounds coming from the man bigger than he. In short time Emerson stopped moving and went limp, only supported by Nikolai’s arms. To Chester’s surprise, Nikolai gently lowered Emerson to the floor and let go, stretching out his own neck. “Boy, even with all those broken bones that guy is strong.”

Chester gaped open-mouthed at the body on the floor. “Is he…?”

Nikolai shook his head. “He’s going to have one nasty headache when he wakes up though.”

The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors hissed open to show a man chewing nervously on his thumbnail. He took one look at Emerson lying unconscious at Nikolai’s feet then glanced at Chester. He looked up and down the hallway in a panic before looking again at Nikolai and pointing at Chester. “What’s he doing here?”

Nikolai grabbed an arm and started pulling Emerson out of the elevator. “Couldn’t be helped.”

The man grabbed the other arm and helped drag Emerson down the hallway. “Why isn’t he in the air?”

“He wouldn’t leave without the aliens.”

Chester followed, remaining silent as the two men dragged Emerson behind them. Had his father told them the truth about Thomas? His father was so secretive, it seemed odd that he would trust this knowledge with anyone, let alone a mercenary for hire.

“They both won’t fit in the plane,” the man remarked.

“We’ll do something else,” Nikolai replied.

“This is not what 1X asked for.”

“No plan survives contact with the enemy. Of all people, he should know that.”

The man was shaking his head as they pulled Emerson through an open office door. “I’m just saying he’s not going to like this.”

They dropped Emerson in the corner and exited the room. The man swiped a digital access card across the panel on the wall and the door clicked loudly. “Nobody’s getting in or out of this room unless they have a laser torch,” he said.

Nikolai nodded. “Now. Where’s the alien?”

“Right this way,” the man said and headed off down the hallway.

Chapter 19

Thomas sat in the sparse room and watched the second hand tick away the minutes that bled into hours. They had allowed him to follow as they brought his mother upstairs. Once there, they had separated them muttering something about emergency surgery and stuck him in here. He spent nearly an hour slamming himself against the door trying to break it down. He finally stopped when the body he was in couldn't take the abuse anymore. If only he had been uploaded into that soldier's body. He guessed that guy would have sheared the bolts right off the door if he slammed himself into it.

He was nursing the bruises that formed along his upper arms and shoulder when he heard the door click loudly.

Thomas stood up and backed against the far wall. It was odd, all this time, all he wanted was for someone to come and let him out of this room. Now that it was happening, he was terrified of what it meant. Now that they were here, what were they going to do to him?

The door swung open and Thomas cringed, waiting for the worst. Then he looked a little closer and realized it was Chester standing in the open doorway. Chester spotted him almost at the same time and a smile grew quickly and looked like it would tear his face in half.

"Thomas!" Chester said and rushed into the room. He grabbed Thomas in a bear hug and lifted him off the ground. "When they took you I thought I'd never see you again!" Chester continued.

He set Thomas down and took a step back to look at him. Despite seeming impossible, his smile was even wider. Another man stepped through the doorway and Thomas looked at him then quickly scrambled away in alarm.

Chester noticed his reaction and quickly looked behind him and then snapped back to Thomas with his hands held calmingly out in front of him. "It's okay. This is Nikolai. He's going to get us out of

here.”

Thomas felt relief wash over him. “Where is he taking us?”

“Anywhere we want to go. But first, we have to get away from here.”

Thomas stood rigid. “I’m not going anywhere without my mother.”

Nikolai’s shoulders dropped and he let out an exasperated sigh.

“Of course you aren’t,” he said.

Chapter 20

Braxton was making a final pass through the convention building when the call came in.

“Braxton,” he said as he scanned the empty space. Every booth had been dismantled to eliminate any hiding spots that 1X might have used and left behind clues as to where he had gone. The voice on the other side broke through his concentration with the news. In an instant Braxton wasn’t paying attention to the empty conference space as he turned and held the phone tightly against his ear. “Say that again!?” he said.

“My team arrived to relieve the first shift watching the Gregory residence, but there is nobody here.”

Something must have gone horribly wrong. The two men he had set up to watch Max’s house were the best of the best. They would never abandon their post no matter what.

“The thing is,” the caller continued, “the car is still here. Just the observation team is missing.”

Braxton snapped his fingers at a group of soldiers nearby and one of them came over. Braxton cupped a hand over his phone as he spoke to the soldier. “Get backup units to the Gregory and the Harrigan residences A.S.A.P.”

The soldier nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Braxton returned to his call, confident his orders would be carried out expeditiously, only to be interrupted by the call-waiting feature on his phone. He stared at the incoming number. It was not one he recognized. Nobody should have his number if he didn’t already know who they were. “Hold on,” he told his first caller and switched to the new call. “This is Major General Braxton,” he said, layering his voice with the sound of authority. “To whom am I speaking?”

“Hello, Jerry,” the voice said.

“Who is this!?” Braxton demanded.

“Tsk, tsk, Jerry. Is that any way to speak to an old friend?”

Braxton scoured his memories until he focused on the source of the voice. If he was right, he hadn’t spoken to this person in decades. “Trevor? Trevor Cassar?”

The voice chuckled. “Very good. I wish I had your excellent memory.”

“How did you get this number?! Why are you calling me?!”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“A proposition?”

“More of a trade, actually.”

“Listen Trevor, I don’t know how you got this number and only because you are an old friend will I not mention the risks you are taking by calling it, but I’m in the middle of something and…”

“It’s important you hear what I am offering before you hang up.”

“I don’t have time for…” Braxton started before Trevor cut him off again.

“As a show of good faith, I have returned control of the United States missile system back to your government. If you meet my demands I will also give you 1X.”

Braxton paused for a moment before speaking. “I’m listening.”

Trevor continued, sounding satisfied that he held all the power. “I would like to offer you 1X on a silver platter. I know where he is hiding in Manhattan, which happens to be where you are now, I believe.”

Braxton couldn’t keep from glancing around him, spotting the security cameras along the edges of the roof. “How do you know where I am?”

Trevor laughed. “You know me too well to ask that, Jerry. I have 1X and you want him.”

“Well then.” Braxton replied. “When can you give him to me?”

“Ah, ah,” chided Trevor. “You haven’t heard what I want in return.”

Chapter 21

Thomas sat in the back seat of the SUV beside Chester, both of them hidden from view behind darkly tinted windows. Nikolai was driving fast, the wheels on one side rising slightly as he careened around tight corners.

The third tight turn in a row had them nearly on top of each other before the car finally piling straightened and slowed down. Nikolai spoke over his shoulder. “We should be far enough away to keep anyone from following us. But we can’t outrun a phone call, so why try?”

Thomas couldn’t keep the vision of his mother in the young girl’s body bleeding on the floor out of his mind. He was desperate. He didn’t want to have his mother again only to lose her forever. He knew that if he could see her one more time, he could do something to save her life. He felt it deep inside him. He couldn’t explain it, but he felt a calmness come over him when he thought about his family. A feeling that, as long as they were together, everything would be okay. He hoped Chester and Nikolai would do what they said to find his mom.

He looked over at Chester who stared out the window. Chester hadn’t said a word to him since they left the SETI Institute. For the time being, that was just fine with Thomas. After what he had witnessed since being activated, humans were not to be trusted.

Then again, he had no choice but to place all his trust in the humans that were sitting with him in this car. Nikolai promised to get him to his mother, or die trying. It was that kind of talk that engendered trust. While they were still at SETI, Chester had apologized for everything that had happened and then fell silent, lost in his own personal purgatory. Maybe he was judging this species too hastily.

Thomas returned his attention to the trees lining the road that blurred by the SUV windows. Every now and then, the SUV would change lanes quickly to pass the slower cars. Nikolai treated the other cars more like stationary obstacles than other drivers sharing

the same stretch of highway.

The SUV took an exit and made several turns until it pulled up to the emergency entrance of a multi-story hospital. Nikolai shut off the engine and spun around in his seat. “Wait here until I find out what room she is in.”

Thomas’s stomach somersaulted as he looked at the entrance. His vision blurred and then he thought he saw a path of fireflies leading from the SUV to the front doors of the hospital. He blinked twice, but the fireflies remained, people walking among them like they weren’t even there.

“Never mind,” Thomas said as he opened the door. “I know where she is.”

Nikolai jumped from his seat and met Thomas just as he exited the SUV. “Where are you going?”

Thomas surveyed the trail of sparkling lights that went into the hospital and then looked up at Nikolai. “I can lead us right to her.”

Nikolai gave him a strange look. “How?”

Thomas shrugged. “I can’t describe it. But I know how to find my mother. Trust me.”

Chester joined them, a curious look was on his face as he looked intently at Thomas. Then he turned to the tall man. “Let him try, Nikolai.”

Nikolai glanced around and then retrieved the keys to the SUV. “Okay, but when this all goes south, I’m back in charge.”

Thomas took that as approval and dashed off, following the sparkling lights that hovered above the ground. Once he entered the hospital, he looked back and was surprised to find that the trail disappeared at his feet. The glowing trail did not lead back to the SUV. Whatever he was seeing had to be leading him straight to his mother.

He followed the trail all the way to the elevator. They piled in

and the button for the third floor sparkled. He pushed the button as Nikolai pushed a man back out who tried to join them for the ride up. “Take the next one, chief,” he said as the doors closed. They could hear the man’s muffled cursing as they rose to the third floor.

What would they find once they arrived? Despite his feelings of serenity, Thomas logically didn’t know if he could do something to save his mother’s life. What would he do once they got there? He hoped this feeling wasn’t just some strange trance. He didn’t want to go there only to find out he really couldn’t help and then watch her die.

Chapter 22

After Trevor had given Braxton his demands, Braxton finally was able to hang up the phone. He knew it was a risk, but that is what his position was all about. Assess risks and take the ones that make sense. Trevor had provided a convincing agenda. As soon as Braxton delivered his end, Trevor would provide him with 1X. As he switched back to the earlier call, he heard the gruff voice of the man who had patiently waited for his return talking to someone in the background.

"I don't care. Yes, put additional resources on it."

Braxton cleared his throat and the man's attention returned to the phone call immediately.

"Major General, sir. We think we have something on the missing families. They were seen by the neighbors getting into a white van."

"Have they been kidnapped?"

"It didn't appear that way, sir. It appears they went willingly; even urging the driver to hurry up as they raced away."

"Get traffic cameras looking for the van immediately," Braxton ordered.

"Already done, sir. We tracked the van to a private airfield where an unregistered plane landed, took several boarders, and then took off again less than an hour ago."

"All air traffic has been grounded."

"I know that, sir. Whoever it is has been staying under the radar. They could be heading just about anywhere."

Braxton looked around him at the empty convention hall.

"They aren't going just anywhere. They are going to their children," he said and then disconnected the phone. It seemed that Trevor had already known that everyone would be together soon.

The first domino had already toppled and he had no choice but to let events play out.

He dialed a number from memory. Unlike the first few times he had tried this number, his call was answered after three rings. The voice on the other side spoke after a brief pause and it sounded sleepy, like whoever it was had just woken up.

“Emerson.”

Chapter 23

Nikolai steeled himself for anything as the elevator slowed and the doors opened. At the other end of the hallway that stretched ahead, a guard stood in front of a door. Nikolai quickly guided the two boys down a side hallway and out of sight of the guard.

Thomas looked up at him. “She’s in the room with the soldier.”

Nikolai nodded. “I know. Leave it up to me.” He glanced around and saw a small lunch room with a closet on the other side. “Wait here,” he said and disappeared inside.

As he walked purposefully to the closet, he overheard two nurses sitting at a table eating their lunch.

“Do you think she will make it?” the first one asked.

“I don’t think so,” the second one responded. “She lost a lot of blood and her kidneys were all but obliterated by the bullet. She’s in post-op now, but I’m afraid her chances aren’t good. She’s not likely to make it through the night.”

“Even if she does,” said the first again. “She’ll be dependent on dialysis until they find a kidney donor.”

Nikolai hurried to the closet and stepped inside. He dressed quickly in scrubs and a light blue paper face mask and returned to where the boys waited for him.

He grabbed the empty gurney standing against the wall and told Thomas and Chester to climb on as he tossed a sheet over them. He positioned them so that Thomas’ head poked out the top and Chester’s feet poked out the bottom, making them look like one long pear shaped man rather than two kids. He stuck a facemask and shower cap onto Thomas’ head and then began pushing the gurney quickly down the hallway.

As they neared the door, the soldier noticed they were rolling towards him. He stiffened and put his arm up to stop them as

Nikolai tried to use the gurney to push open the door.

"Halt," he commanded. "No unauthorized personnel may enter this room."

Nikolai gave the man a hard stare. "And you are?" he demanded.

"Sergeant Eriksen," the soldier replied quickly.

Nikolai repositioned his facemask as if to make sure that it securely protected him. "I have someone who needs the ventilator in this room. He's highly contagious and if I don't get him in there in the next five minutes, this entire floor will have to be placed under quarantine."

Eriksen looked down at Thomas. Thomas took his cue perfectly and hacked up a storm. Eriksen quickly placed a hand over his mouth in a panic. Nikolai held out a face mask to him. "Here, put this on."

As he reached for it, Nikolai drove his other hand forward and slammed it into the soldier's chin. His head snapped back and hit the wall with such force, it left an indent in the drywall. Kicking the door open with his foot, Nikolai caught Eriksen and carried him into the room. He dropped the unconscious guard in a chair and then pulled the gurney into the room, checking that nobody had witnessed what he had done. Satisfied his actions had gone unnoticed, he closed the door.

Chapter 24

Once inside the room, Thomas jumped from the gurney and ran to the girl sitting in bed with her eyes closed. He stood next to the bed and placed a hand on hers. Her eyes fluttered open and she looked quizzically at him. He pulled down his mask and her eyes shone with recognition.

“Thomas,” she said.

“I’m here, Mother.”

“How did you find me?” she asked softly.

“I followed a trail of fireflies.”

She smiled weakly. “I’m glad to hear that. You can heal me now.”

What was she talking about? “Heal you?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

She closed her eyes and then opened them again slowly. “Once we reach a certain age, we can manipulate our environment. It’s not much, but you should be able to heal this body enough to keep it alive.”

He looked back at Chester and Nikolai who were staring in silence at their interaction. He looked back at his mother. “I don’t know how.”

“Don’t think about it. Just place your hand here.” She moved his hand to cover the side where she was shot. “Think about the fireflies. Use them to stitch the wounds.”

Thomas closed his eyes and tried to picture the fireflies. Nothing happened. He squeezed his eyes tighter and tried so hard to focus. It was no use. The harder he tried to focus on the mystical fireflies, the more he thought about everything but fireflies.

He opened his eyes and took away his hand. “I can’t do it.”

She caressed his cheek with a warm hand. “Yes, you can.”

Nikolai placed a hand on his shoulder. “Our doctors have done everything they could, but they don’t think she’ll survive the night. It’s up to you.”

Thomas took a deep breath. His mother was right. It was up to him. He turned back to her and placed his hand on the area the bullet had devastated.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. He suddenly felt his hand grow warm and he heard an audible gasp from behind. He opened his eyes to see the fireflies dancing around his mother’s body just under his hand. She gritted her teeth and moaned as the fireflies entered her body and disappeared.

Thomas started to remove his hand when his mother grabbed him with a renewed strength and held it in place.

“Not yet,” she grunted.

Thomas kept his hand in place as the light amplified, causing everyone to shield their eyes.

His hand burned as if he held it in a blazing fire. As soon as the light died down, Thomas’ hand felt cool again and he looked at his mother. She sat up quickly and felt the area on her side. Lifting her shirt, she showed Thomas that the wound had healed, leaving the smallest of discolorations as the only proof that she was injured at all.

She hopped out of bed and they embraced. “I knew you could do it, Thomas,” she whispered into his ear.

Thomas let go of his mother and turned to Chester who had barely spoken more than once since they left the SETI Institute.

“Thank you, Chester.”

Chester smiled sadly. “I’m sorry. For everything.”

Thomas smiled back. “Don’t be. You did it. We’re together.”

His mother stepped forward. “But we need your help one last time.”

Chester nodded. “Sure. Anything.”

“We need you to send us into space using your radio telescopes.”

“Any particular direction?” he asked.

She smiled warmly. “I’ll give you the coordinates when we are ready.”

Nikolai had opened the door a crack and was peeking down the hallway. He looked back at them. “The coast is clear. We should go now if we want to get out of here.”

Thomas’ mother stepped forward. “We are ready.”

“Where to?” Nikolai asked.

Chester had a pained expression on his face as he responded. “Back to the SETI Institute.”

Nikolai shut the door and gave him a quizzical expression. “Are you… kidding me?!”

Chester looked down at the floor. “No. I know it’s crazy, but that’s where the only equipment exists to download Thomas and his mother and transmit them into space. It’s also the only hope to return Max and Terri back to their bodies.”

Nikolai pressed a palm into his eyes as if a headache was starting to develop there.

“Who? Who are Max and Terri?”

When he saw Chester take a big breath to start explaining, he put up a hand. “Never mind. We don’t have time. Is there any way I can get you to safety before we try this?”

Chester shook his head. “I have to run the equipment, no one else but maybe Thomas’ mother knows how, and she has to be in it

when it is activated." Nikolai wiped a hand down his face.

"This won't be easy," he said as he looked at them with defeat in his eyes.

The door suddenly opened causing everyone to whip their heads up in surprise. Several armed soldiers burst into the room, guns raised.

"Freeze!" one of the soldiers barked.

Thomas' stomach cramped up and it felt like his whole body was on fire. He balled his fists against the pain and hunched over, gripping his stomach.

"Thomas, no!" his mother shouted. "Never use your powers in anger!"

But it was too late.

Thomas couldn't control himself and he saw the fireflies building up all around him. The soldiers saw it too and gripped their rifles nervously, looking to their commander for what to do.

Thomas' mother started for him, but one of the soldiers reacted on instinct and hit her across the face with the butt of his rifle.

She toppled backward and hit the ground with a sickening thud. Thomas looked over at her and saw blood oozing from the cut on her face. He tried to get up, but the fireflies were thickening, making it harder for him to move. A soldier grabbed him and forced him to lie face down on the ground.

That was all the motivation he needed to let loose the floodgates.

Chapter 25

When the soldiers first burst into the room, Chester's legs froze and he stood as still as a marble statue. But when the sparkling fireflies started forming around Thomas, he found the courage to move. That was until one of the soldiers hit Thomas' mother.

Thomas was set upon by another soldier who pressed a knee into his back. The fireflies swirled angrily around them.

It started out as a low hum, nearly indistinguishable from the hum of the fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling. But as the swarm of fireflies thickened around Thomas and the soldier on his back, the hum increased with it until both the light and the sound had drowned out the recessed lighting.

Thomas' mother was screaming at him to calm down. But he wasn't listening to her. How could he? So much was happening all around, she was only part of the overall noise of panic that had arisen from the soldiers who were backing away from the growing swarm of fireflies.

As the sound increased, it became unbearable and everyone placed their hands over their ears. Thomas' mother kept screaming at him, but nobody could hear her as the droning of the fireflies drowned out all other sounds.

Suddenly, the fireflies disappeared along with the sound. The resulting calm was even more unnerving.

Thomas' mother screamed. "Nooooo!"

She was the only one who knew what Thomas was capable of.

Chester suddenly felt the pull of gravity. But it wasn't the usual downward tug that he never really noticed unless he tripped and fell. The sensation of gravity was drawing him toward Thomas, along with other items in the room.

Thomas' mother suddenly held her arms out wide and enveloped

Thomas and the soldier on his back with a solid wall of fireflies.

The sensation of the shift in gravity stopped as soon as she had done that and she looked over at Chester.

“Get out of here!” she yelled.

Chester barely had the time to do as she said when the fireflies exploded outward, sending everyone crashing into the walls around the small hospital room.

Chester landed on the floor, the wind knocked out of him. He got to his hands and knees to see Thomas standing in the middle of the room. The soldiers’ assault rifles were hovering in the air pointing at them. They had their arms raised and every one of them was white as a sheet.

Thomas’ mother got to her feet and slowly approached him. “Stay calm, honey. Nobody is going to hurt you.”

He looked at her, but he didn’t seem to see her as one of the assault rifles shifted to point at her. She held her hands up defensively. “It’s me, sweetie. It’s Mom.”

Chester could tell Thomas was struggling with that information. He was shaking his head and the rifle started to float away from her.

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

She took another step and the rifle snapped back to point at her and fired a single shot.

In the enclosed space of the hospital room, the shot sounded like a cannon booming. Chester looked at Thomas’ mother, expecting her to be bleeding again. Instead, she was focused on the bullet that hovered in the space right in front of her.

Her hands trembled violently as the bullet inched slowly closer to her. She took a step back to give herself some more distance to slow the bullet’s velocity before it reached her. According to Newton’s First Law of Motion, a body in motion tends to stay in motion

unless acted upon by an external force.

Whatever force Thomas' mother was using, it didn't look like she was having an easy time dealing with the kinetic energy contained within the airborne bullet.

Thomas saw what he had done and swiped a hand sideways. The bullet suddenly flew sideways and shattered the window.

Thomas' mother collapsed to the floor and Thomas ran to her, tears streaming down his face. "I'm so sorry, Mother."

She looked at him. "It's okay. You have much to learn before you can control the tide. Now, let it go."

The assault rifles clattered to the floor and Nikolai was the first to grab one and point it at the soldiers.

"Don't," he directed. They all raised their hands in compliance as he kicked the rest of the assault rifles away from them.

Chester got to his feet and slowly walked over to Thomas and his mother. She cradled a weeping Thomas in her arms as she looked up at him.

"We should go," Chester said.

She nodded and helped Thomas to his feet as they followed Nikolai out of the room and into the chaos of the hallway. Apparently, gunfire in a hospital room raised all sorts of alarms.

People screamed when they saw Nikolai brandishing the assault rifle in front of him as they rushed down the hallway. He stopped at a door halfway to the elevators and nodded at it. "Take the stairs. If the police arrive soon, the elevator will become our prison cell."

Chester held the door open as everyone else rushed into the stairwell, Thomas and his mother leaning on each other for support. It was hard to tell who was helping who. They started to head down the stairs. Nikolai called out to them. "Up. To the roof."

Chester looked at him in surprise. "Up? Won't we be trapped on

the roof?”

Nikolai shook his head. “I never go in anywhere when I don’t have at least two ways out. There is a helicopter waiting for us on the roof.”

Chester happily changed direction and headed up the stairs, Thomas and his mother following in his wake with Nikolai taking up the rear.

Chester was wheezing by the time they reached the final landing and he burst through the door onto the roof. He thought his lungs were going to explode and hunched over, gasping for air as he scanned the roof for the helicopter that was waiting for them.

His heart leapt in excitement.

There it was on the other side.

He pointed it out to Thomas and they ran for it, jumping over the pipes and wires that crisscrossed the roof. Nikolai traveled slowly backwards over the roof, covering the stairwell door with his assault rifle in case anyone decided to come after them.

Chester reached the helicopter first and the man inside the door helped him into it. As soon as Thomas and his mother were on board, the helicopter lifted into the air.

Without Nikolai.

“Hey!” Chester yelled over the thrum of the blades and pointed at the man they had left behind. “What about him?”

The doorman swung a large caliber machine gun attached to the frame of the helicopter and pointed it out the door as they swung around. The man pulled on the charging handle and smiled as he maneuvered the machine gun to target Nikolai. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of him.”

Chester shuddered in time with the rapid fire from the machine gun. He stared in horror as Nikolai dove for cover behind air conditioners.

The helicopter made one more pass, but thankfully didn't fire at Nikolai as they swooped overhead.

Chester looked at the man in disgust.

"Oh, don't give me that look," the man said. "I was only following orders."

"Yeah?" Chester spat back. "Whose orders?"

He hooked a thumb toward the cockpit. "His."

Chester focused on the man sitting next to the pilot and his heart fell when he saw who turned around to face him. There was no mistaking the bruised and swollen face.

"Welcome home, Chester," Emerson said, grimacing as an evil smile spread across his face.

Chapter 26

Braxton had returned to his mobile command center to review the security footage from the events earlier that day at the convention center when his phone chimed. He answered it immediately. “Yes?”

He listened intently without saying a word for nearly a minute. “Let me know as soon as it’s done.” He hung up without waiting for a response.

Apparently there had been an incident at the hospital where they had taken the girl alien and several people were injured when a military helicopter opened fire. Thankfully, nobody was dead and the public relations office was already working on a response that involved lots of money to those at the hospital and a plausible story about equipment malfunctions and the like.

It was amazing how many people would remain silent in exchange for money, no matter what had happened. Secrets weren’t cheap, but they were easily bought for the right price.

He glanced at his watch. Trevor would be at the number provided for the next ten minutes. Braxton was really cutting it close, but he had obtained what Trevor wanted. And soon, he would be delivering 1X tied up neatly with a bow.

He dialed the number and the call was answered on the first ring. “Have you done what I asked?” Trevor said without first verifying that it was Braxton.

“I have the aliens in custody and will be preparing them for transmission as soon as they are back at the SETI Institute.”

“Good. What about the children?”

“They will be returned to their homes and left alone. Unfortunately, their parents have gone missing.”

“Don’t worry. They are safe until this is all over.”

“So you took them?”

“Of course. I couldn’t risk that you would try to use them to gain leverage. I also needed them to go public should you not keep up your end of the bargain.”

Braxton gripped the phone with white knuckles. He was powerless and they both knew it. “I will keep up my end.”

“Aaaand?” Trevor prompted.

“And provide a healthy tax free compensation for the inconveniences we caused them.”

“That’s better.”

“I have to ask, Trevor. How did you find out about the aliens?”

Trevor laughed. “If I told you that, you might be able to follow the trail back to me. I better keep my sources anonymous.”

“Then at least tell me why you want to send them back into space? Wouldn’t it be better to have them here on Earth? Think of all the things we could learn from them.”

“We are not ready for what they have to offer us, Jerry. It was my understanding that the plan was to limit access to the aliens. The reason I became a hacker was to equalize the injustices I found in the world. I’m only concerned about living in a fair world. At least as fair as I can make it. If only you had access to alien technology that wouldn’t be fair to the rest of us, now would it?”

“I guess that’s the difference between us.”

“Yes Jerry. I want to live in a world where everyone is given the same benefits and you are always looking for an edge to put yourself ahead of the rest.”

“Then why are you giving me 1X? Doesn’t that tip the scales in my favor if I ever plan to go after you?”

Trevor laughed again. “1X will never give any of us to you.”

“Then why are you turning him in?”

“You didn’t let me finish. We vowed to never turn on one another as long as we stuck to a code. 1X broke that code and he must endure punishment for his indiscretion. I’m only restoring balance to the world by giving him to you.”

“I send the aliens out into space and return the civilians back to their ordinary lives and you will give me 1X?”

“That is the arrangement.”

“Now that I have the aliens, what if I refuse? Do I have to worry that you will unleash all your little hacker buddies on the U.S. government?”

“Ask yourself this, Jerry. Who has proven that they are more valuable to you?”

When Braxton didn’t respond, Trevor continued. “I trust you will make the wise choice.”

And with that, Trevor disconnected. Braxton sat in his mobile command unit with a silent phone to his ear. After a full minute, he lowered the phone and closed his eyes. He prayed he was making the right decision.

Chapter 27

Chester sat in silence as the helicopter landed in the parking lot. How could things have gone so wrong? When he first discovered that the United States had an alien intelligence locked inside a computer program behind an unbreakable security wall, he knew he could break it. He was the smartest kid alive. He had the motivation and the skills. If he couldn't do it, it couldn't be done.

And then he had done it. He had activated Thomas. Those first few weeks were exciting. People in different military uniforms with shoulder to shoulder medals all stopped by to gawk at the boy wonder and his alien friend. It didn't take long, but the excitement at simply being able to talk to an alien wore off far too quickly for Chester's liking and soon they were talking about farming knowledge from the alien brain like it was a crop to be harvested.

Chester had talked with Thomas late into the night and discovered that despite the obvious differences, they were more alike than not. He wasn't a danger to anyone. He was just a kid who didn't belong. That was something Chester could relate with all too well.

Maybe that was why he left the back door open that enabled Thomas to make his escape into the real world. Well, at least the real world of the Internet. When news of his escape reached the highest levels in government, everyone reacted like Thomas was public enemy number one.

Once they found him hiding out in the ROBLOX worlds, Chester was forced to build the Extractors that enabled humans to follow Thomas into the digital realm. He had no other choice but to build working equipment. But he made a few modifications that would cause issues with anyone who used it. Maybe, after a few sacrifices, it would be considered too dangerous to use.

But he didn't count on how relentless the particular commander assigned to retrieve Thomas would be. As each soldier went insane, against all logic, the commander kept sending more in. Chester couldn't admit what he had done without being thrown in prison

for the rest of his life for treason, so he kept sending one doomed soul after another through the Extractor and into the ROBLOX world after Thomas.

Then his masters showed up with two kids to be placed into the Extractors. Chester almost broke down and told everyone what he had done. But, he reasoned, his confession was useless at that point. Instead, he did his best to warn Max and Terri about the insanity issue caused by dying and being reborn. He made it sound like a cause and effect built into the human brain. But in reality, he had written the code that caused that nasty issue and couldn't fix it without admitting what he had done.

Chester stared over at Thomas and his mother, sitting at gunpoint in the bodies of Max and Terri, and wondered if everything he had done to keep Thomas safe was worth it. He hadn't managed to do anything to really help him.

Despite his best intentions, Thomas was still a captive of the U.S. military. A tear ran down Chester's cheek as he was ordered out of the helicopter along with the aliens and made his way across the parking lot.

Everything he had done had gone horribly wrong.

In fact, everything that was going to happen to the aliens was his fault. If he hadn't been so determined and sure of himself, Thomas would still be lying dormant in the message received from deep space decades ago, safe.

Given time, someone would have eventually activated Thomas. Maybe, if Chester hadn't interfered, Thomas would have woken up in a world where everyone accepted aliens.

Because of Chester, Thomas was being used as a pawn to gain an edge over perceived threats from other governments. A world where everyone brandished their differences like a sword, thinking they were right and vastly superior while everyone who thought differently was definitely in the wrong.

Chester was too eager to prove he was the smartest human in the

world. Instead, he proved he was the daftest by unleashing his fractured, warring world on Thomas.

Emerson winced from the pain as he hopped from the helicopter and joined the rest of the group as they stood at the front doors of the SETI Institute.

Chester could only imagine what horrors were awaiting Thomas and his mother. Especially once they discovered that he had healed her with a touch. With those thoughts running through his head, there was no way Chester could have anticipated what Emerson did next.

Chapter 28

Emerson grimaced from the soreness in his muscles and joints. Whoever 1X had hired to get Chester out was brutally efficient and if Emerson hadn't stayed at the top of his game he might have been killed. Unfortunately, the painkillers coursing through his system could only do so much. It also didn't help that he took a lower dosage to keep his wits about him.

He looked down at Chester who had never looked smaller than he did right now. "I need you to get these two into the Extractors and ready for transport."

Chester glared at him. "No!"

Emerson closed his eyes. It was the longest of days and he didn't need a defiant twelve-year-old causing more problems. He opened his eyes again. "You don't understand…"

Chester cut him off, his jaw clenched and his eyes piercing intent boring into Emerson's face. "I understand perfectly and I won't help you do anything more to Thomas or his mother."

"Look, kid, we aren't doing anything with them. We are preparing them to go home."

"Hah!" Chester spat out. "What makes you think you can trick me again?!"

Emerson took a very deep breath and through gritted teeth replied "It's not a trick, Chester. I've been ordered by Major General Braxton to transmit the two aliens back into space."

Chester's eyes grew wide. Emerson could see the war going on behind his eyes trying to decide if it was a trick. "You're letting them go?"

It hurt his stiff neck to move it, but Emerson nodded anyway.

Chester glanced at the aliens and then looked back at him and

crossed his arms. “I don’t believe you. Do whatever you want to me. I’ll never help you again!”

“After the aliens have left the planet, I’ve also been ordered to bring Max and Terri back into their bodies. Then you have to upload all the soldiers and destroy the Extractors and all records of how they were built. After that, you are free to go. You will no longer be a guest of the United States government.”

Chester was staring at him with his mouth open. “What are you talking about?”

“The aliens are no longer the priority. As a result, you are no longer needed. Once we have finished here, there will be a plane to pick you up.”

Chester glanced around the parking lot. “And take me where?”

Emerson shrugged. “Back to your mother.”

Chester’s eyes narrowed with suspicion “What suddenly became more important than aliens?”

“Your father. Apparently, his hacker friends decided he crossed a line when he took over missile command and are turning him over to us.”

Emerson successfully stifled the smile that threatened to break out on his face as he watched Chester try to say something several times, with no sound emitting from his mouth. He also made sure not to nod in satisfaction as Chester finally closed it and kept it closed and just stared off into the empty parking lot. Emerson knew he was deep in thought but he needed an answer.

Emerson cleared his throat, bringing Chester’s attention back to him. “Can I rely on your assistance in completing my orders?”

Chester simply looked at him in defeat and nodded.

Chapter 29

Max blinked and shut his eyes against the harsh light above him. The last thing he remembered was sitting in the street in his ROBLOX city with Terri waiting for something, anything, to happen.

He blinked again and realized he was doing it with his real eyes. He lifted his head up to see the room. With a wave of relief, he realized he was back in Chester's lab. He glanced over at the other harness and Terri was just opening her eyes.

Chester came into view and smiled. "Welcome back," he said.

"It worked?" Max croaked.

Chester's smile faded as he unhooked the cables attached to Max's head. "Yes. Do you think you can stand?"

Max wobbled as he stepped from the harness. Emerson, looking like he was hit by a truck, was helping Terri out of her harness. He looked back at Chester. "What's going on?"

Chester finished resetting the harness. "We're getting everyone out of ROBLOX and back into their bodies."

Terri swayed as she walked over to join them. "What about Thomas?"

Chester looked at the computer terminal and let out a sigh. "They're gone."

"What?" Max exclaimed. "Where did they go?"

Chester looked back at him. "We sent them back out into space."

"Why?" Terri asked.

Chester gave her a wistful look "They didn't belong here."

Max looked around him and noticed for the first time the line of

gurneys with the soldiers' bodies lined up alongside one wall of the lab. Chester pointed out two men in white smocks that looked like doctors. "They will check you over and, as soon as you are cleared, you can return home."

"Home?" Max said.

Chester nodded and smiled sadly. "Your job's done. Congratulations, you get to return to your normal lives."

Max looked at Terri. She smiled at him. "If what we ever did could be considered normal," she said with a hint of sarcasm.

He laughed and they went with the doctors.

The next several hours went by in a blur as they were checked over and tested on every machine at the hospital before they were cleared for release. Terri marveled at the scars on her side, but nobody was willing to provide an explanation to her.

They were driven back to Moffett Airfield and boarded a military plane. Terri fell asleep the moment the plane was in the air. Neither of them had slept the entire time they were in ROBLOX and they were exhausted.

Max watched her sleeping peacefully curled up in her seat and wondered if the events that had taken place in an entirely different world than the one they lived would change anything between them.

As his eyes slowly closed and sleep overtook him, he decided that he wouldn't let it. They had grown closer with their shared unique experience and he was determined to see where it would lead. But that would have to wait until he was well rested.

Chapter 30

Braxton felt very pleased with himself as he stood in the darkened room at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling, a 905-acre military installation located in Southeast Washington, D.C., with his new rank of General. His part in the capture of 1X had enabled him to skip a rank and begin his pursuit of collecting stars. At this moment, he was standing next to the nation's highest-ranking military intelligence officer and observing the current residence of the United States government's most valuable prisoner.

Kane Clark, the Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, himself a three-star general, watched 1X sit patiently with his hands folded on the table in front of him in the small interrogation room. He watched the prisoner through the one-way glass.

"1X is not someone who gets caught unwillingly." Clark remarked. "Ask yourself, General, why he turned himself in? Why now?"

Braxton felt a cold sweat break out on his brow as he regarded 1X in the small room. 1X was chained to the metal table by his hands and his feet, yet he seemed as calm as if he were sitting in a fancy restaurant in Paris waiting for the maître d' to present him with the wine list. It seemed Clark had a point that Braxton hadn't considered. It started to unnerve him.

"I don't know," Braxton said.

The Director turned to face him, his eyes boring into Braxton's with a threatening intensity Braxton seldom ever experienced. "I suggest you find that out. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today!"

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"Keeps you turning the page!"

"I didn't want to put it down!"

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